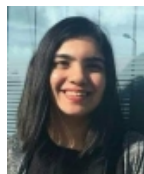


Blame and shame: examining the media coverage of a Dalit rape victim in India



*The 2012 Delhi gang rape triggered introspection within the Indian media on how it reported on sexual violence, and this article analyses how far the print media in India may have come. **Sumedha Pal** takes the case of reportage of rape of a Dalit woman in 2013.*

In 2017 several issues surrounding sexual violence, consent and autonomy of women have been discussed in public in the form of Women's Marches, the #MeToo movement, and so on. Initiating these conversations has been hard, as there is little understanding of the complexity of these issues, and one such realm that has been largely left out from these conversations is the linguistics of representation of sexual violence in the media.

The media constitutes a key arena in which rape is defined, shaping perceptions about how sexual violence is viewed in the society and who is held accountable and what assumptions are being conveyed to the audiences about the victims and the perpetrators. Here I aim to explore aspects of news coverage to reveal how the language used in texts, legitimises, sustains and condones violence against women.

"Rape is a unique crime, for society inflicts more suffering on the victim, than the perpetrator", writes Shakuntala Rao in her article "[Covering Rape in a Shame Culture](#)", which focuses on the Indian Television media's portrayal of violence against women. She highlights that crimes against women coming from lower socio- economic strata are not given adequate attention. A woman is raped in India in [every other fifteen minutes](#), the nation is termed as the 'Rape capital' of the world and the media has termed the crisis of its sexual violence an '[epidemic](#)'. The country attracted global attention after the December 2012 gang rape of a 23-year-old student in Delhi. The victim suffered brutal injuries and succumbed to death. This was the beginning of a powerful movement on ground, and the Indian government acted firmly by amending and implementing laws to ensure safety for women. The changes recommended by the Justice Verma committee were implemented, reforming the Indian criminal system to ensure a faster trial of the accused.



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The 2012 gang rape triggered introspection within the Indian media on how it reported on sexual violence, and this article analyses of how far the print media in India may have come, if at all. How have they fared in the journey of achieving humane reportage surrounding sexual violence, and devoid of myths that perpetuate a rape culture? Sameera Khan in an essay “When survivors become victims”, wrote extensively on the media’s coverage of sexual crimes. Inspection of internal functioning of media organisations also showed a systemic disparity, as fewer women occupy positions of power in media organisations. This research showed that post 2012 stereotypical representations of violence and the victim have not completely waned but have become more subverted in the narrative and need analysis.

My research addressed the case of a Dalit woman, positioned at lowest of both the caste and the gender hierarchy in the Indian society, as reported in *The Times of India*, and *Hindustan Times*, and the *Indian Express* between 5 May 2017 (Verdict day of the 2012 gangrape) until the 25 May 2017. Facing triple oppression of caste, class and gender, the bodies of dalit women are seen as sites of extreme violence. According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India, [more than four Dalit women are raped everyday](#). In the case investigated, the woman [was raped and murdered in May 2017](#), and media coverage of this case coincided with the verdict of the 2012 gangrape case. Critically, in this case, the victim was familiar with the perpetrator. The focus was on understanding the notions of victimhood, sympathies and agency by reflecting on the portrayal of the perpetrator, supposed motivations and the portrayal of the victim.

The following themes emerged in an analysis of the coverage in multiple publications:

The jilted lover and the divorcee

Across publications and multiple story lines the rapist was termed as the jilted lover. The first thing one can draw is the clear establishment of an acquaintance-rape scenario and not the conventional horror story narrative. The relationship the two previously shared then becomes a tool to attribute responsibility of the rape to the victim as she had once known the rapist — and not just that — had shown likeability towards him, which then gives narrative of the ‘virgin-whore’ dichotomy. Indicating that, perhaps, she was not completely innocent as she liked him once, changed her mind and later rejected him. The credibility of the victim gets questioned further when her past relationship status is given inordinate focus. The articles consistently reinforce the fact that she was a divorcee. In India, where marriage is ‘sacrosanct’ and husbands are ‘*parameshwars*’ or gods, patriarchy is so deeply ingrained that women are expected to associate themselves with men to command dignity and respect. In this case, there are aspersions raised on her status because the victim is marred by the ‘stain’ of divorce.

By stating that she was a divorcee the narrative highlights multiple things: she was ‘tainted’; a fallen woman salaciously forming relationships; but most importantly, it gives the impression that she was someone who had transgressed social and cultural norms established for her within the Indian tradition and had chosen to assert herself by choosing a partner of her own choice and then making another choice of rejecting him.

Of monsters and fiends

In order to reflect on the ghastliness of the crime media outlets often compare the perpetrators to monsters or fiends however, in this the accused and his accomplice have been called as persons not as monsters or even beasts. Here, no there isn’t any hyperbolic comparison or hyper-masculinisation of the rapist, contrary to the norm. ‘Abnormality’ of the rapist as some pervert on the loose is not established and this was perhaps done to ensure resonance with the middle-class sensibilities of the readers. As it has been noted, personal details of the victim were magnified but not of the perpetrator. It has been argued that this portrayal of ‘sub’ or ‘foreign’ cultures which do not resonate with the public prevents a feminist critique of dominant patriarchal values and avoids acknowledging endemic cultural attributes excusing normal, aggressive masculinity. In attempts to sell out copies, news publications often end up highlighting stories that seem to resonate with sensibilities of its readership. In this case, it was the English speaking, middle classes. Stories that do not resonate with the readership constitute

an alien or a foreign culture or presence of a narrative that did not suit the urban middle-class sensibility. In this particular case, this was not highlighted in the news coverage. As the perpetrator was represented from the 'people like us narrative' (Khan 2010) to show resonance with the urban audiences of the newspapers. He was someone with a private job, like an average Indian. Nothing in the narrative was highlighted that separated him from any other 'normal' person. Yet, there was a lack of a feminist reformulation of rape. This reformulation maintains that the coverage of violence must be devoid of myths and assumptions about the victim, one that does not trivialise the crime and sensationalise violence, but a coverage that gives dignity to the victim and is humane with its choice of tone and linguistics. From this analysis, this reformulation remains largely absent as the media narrative was too fixated on the victim and her actions.

Tale of trivialisation and the fragmentation of discourse

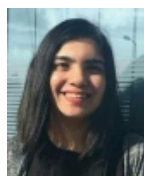
Throughout the analysis of the news articles, it was found across publications that there was no explicit mention of women's safety or the increasing number of rape cases in India and how it can be tackled more effectively. The government and police machinery were not critiqued or held accountable for the systemic failure. More important concerns such as questions of masculinity, power and responsibility of the perpetrator are not given any focus in the news articles. The coverage reflected the gendered patterns of domination and control which naturalised a man's aggression and retribution while riddling the portrayal of the woman with unwarranted attention to her actions and relationship history. In other words, the reports were rooted in rape myths and stereotypes that blame individual pathology for violence, instead of situating it as the result of unequal and gendered social structures. There were repeated mentions of physical violence such as smashing of the skull, mention of the details from the autopsy. This led to trivialisation of the issue of brutality and criminality, and failure to place the issue of violence against women in the larger social and political context of the country. Thus reducing the coverage to nothing more than reactive drive by journalism.

Conclusion

Given the pervasiveness of rape in India, many stories get subsumed under the bulk of others. In order to garner public attention, reactions and readership sensationalist descriptions, gory and unique details of the crime are focused on as shown above. This aspect of the news coverage has led to the sensationalising of sexual violence, decontextualised the issue from the larger discourse by taking elements out of context in the news coverage. Themes of trivialisation of the victim's experiences and naturalisation of aggression and violence implicitly condone the crime. It absolves the blame from not just the perpetrator but the institutions of power — the government, police and civil society — by rendering them invisible in the narrative as it does not adequately critique their role in the perpetuation of violence against women. Inflicting second wounds on the victims by blaming and shaming them, indirectly holds them complicit in their own ordeal. With the initiation of conversations of sexual violence, countering flawed media discourse and scrutinising it must come to the fore.

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About The Author



Sumedha Pal is a journalist and graduated from Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies.